
Introduction

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Clinical records ensure the continuity and coordination of patient care, but they are also used for purposes of legal investigation, medical research and historical scholarship. Hospital archives containing bureaucratic records also have administrative, legal and historical uses. At the end of the twentieth century, the paper documentation of illness careers and hospital management continues to proliferate, even as electronic records begin to constitute some of the more recent memories of our health care institutions. With hospital mergers and privatisation, the vast bulk of paper that has accumulated during the past life of the institutions appears ever more burdensome and redundant. Is it economically rational to allocate scarce resources to the preservation of some or all of these records? Should this be a responsibility of the hospital or the state? British medical archivists recently warned that 'there is a grave danger that almost the whole body of modern medical documents relating to patient care will be destroyed in the near future'. Are prospects any less grim in Australia? Will social historians of medicine lose the raw material of their research? We believe these are questions of great concern to the readers of *Health and History*.

In July 1997, the Centre for the Study of Health and Society (CSHS) and the Australian Science Archives Project (ASAP), both at the University of Melbourne, sponsored a conference on the uses of clinical records and hospital archives and the means of preserving them. Although the title — 'Have your records been doctored?' — was flippant, the issues at stake clearly were very serious indeed. The presentations most relevant to research in the history of medicine and the preservation of our health care heritage are now published in this special symposium.

In addition to the articles that appear in *Health and History*, we heard presentations from a wide range of researchers, archivists and 'records managers'. Professor John Hopper, the director of the Centre for Clinical

Epidemiology at the University of Melbourne, spoke on the importance of retaining records for scientific research, especially genetic studies. He pointed out that the preservation of tissue samples was just as pressing an issue as the retention of paper records. Mr John Snowden, a lawyer from Phillips Fox, gave vivid and disturbing examples of the legal consequences of inadequate record-keeping and preservation. Doris Young, the Professor of General Practice at the University of Melbourne, discussed the many good clinical reasons for good record-keeping in general practice, and pointed out that the records of private and community practices were even more endangered than those of major institutions such as hospitals. Who will preserve the records of general practice? Mr Gavan McCarthy, from ASAP, spoke on the principles and problems of sampling medical records and the impact of changes in hospital administration on record-keeping. Ms Josephine Raw, from the Royal Women's Hospital, described methods of archiving electronic records, and some of the legal and ethical issues that arise when they are used for research purposes.

The meeting concluded with a panel discussion, led by two historians, a records manager and a brave hospital administrator. Dr John Rasa, from the Box Hill Hospital in Melbourne, understood the desire to preserve clinical records and hospital archives but he pointed out that the modern hospital had few incentives to hold on to everything. What practical suggestions could we make? Representatives from the Victorian Public Record Office and the Department of Human Services described some of the skills and services they offered, and explained that they too would benefit from more guidance about what to keep, and how to keep it. In the end, we concluded that we had begun to define the problems but were still far from finding any long-term solutions.

In February 1999, the Wellcome Trust held a meeting in London, 'A healthy heritage: collecting for the future of medical history'. It was meant to address a number of questions: 'How do we decide what should survive, and who is going to keep it all? How do we ensure the survival of the fragile and transitory media we now rely on? How can we increase collaboration and awareness between collecting centres?' These questions remain just as apposite to the predicament we face here in Australia.

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